

Plymouth Church,
New York City.

Brooklyn, N.Y.
Kings Co.

HABS No. 4-11

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NY,
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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District No. 4

Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

PLYMOUTH CHURCH

Orange and Hicks Streets, Brooklyn, New York.

Historical Introduction

Plymouth Church, on Orange Street near Hicks Street in Brooklyn, New York, was built in 1849. According to Noyes L. Thompson's History of Plymouth Church, the plot on which it was built measured 88 feet by 200 feet, and was made up of 7 lots which extended from Orange Street to Cranberry Street; and which originally were a part of the Hick's Estate. There were church buildings on this property prior to the erection of Plymouth Church. In the Life and Work of Henry Ward Beecher, by Thomas W. Knox, 1887, page 134, we find this passage -

"A blessing in disguise was the destruction by fire of the original church buildings in January 1849, as it enabled the society to rebuild on a larger scale.....Mr. J.C. Wells, an English church architect, reduced Mr. Day's plan [Mr. Day was one of the committee] to exact proportions, the society adopted it, and May 29, 1849 was the day appointed for the laying of the corner-stone."

The necessity for a church of greater size was no doubt due to the fact that Henry Ward Beecher was the pastor, and that the congregation, due to his oratory, had grown considerably since his arrival on October 10th, 1847. Referring to the Encyclopædia Britannica, Vol. 3, 13th Edition, page 639, we find this assumption substantiated. "Eight years later (1847) Beecher accepted a call to the pastorate of Plymouth Church (Congregational) then newly organized

in Brooklyn, New York. The situation of the Church, within 5 minutes walk of the chief ferry to New York, the stalwart character of the man who had organized it, and the peculiar eloquence of Beecher, combined to make the pulpit a national platform. The audience room of the church, capable of seating 2000 to 2500 people, frequently contained 500 or 1000 more."

That the pulpit of Plymouth Church was a national platform cannot be denied. Probably the first national recognition it, and Beecher, gained, was due to his sermon regarding the Kansas trouble. Harper, in his Encyclopædia of the United States, Vol. 1, page 304, says -- "During the Kansas Trouble Henry Ward Beecher declared that for the slave holder of Kansas, the Sharpe Rifle was a greater moral agency than the Bible, and so those rifles became known as 'Beecher's Bibles'."

This however, does not appear to be accepted by other authorities, for in Thompson's History of Plymouth Church, this statement is found, and it appears to be more logical than the explanation of Harper. "Throughout the Kansas Settlement struggle, the right of every 'free state' settler to defend himself and his rights, with arms if necessary, from the 'border ruffians' was vindicated from Plymouth Pulpit. The pastor himself subscribed a sufficient amount for the purchase of a Sharpe's Rifle and a Bible, and the congregation expressed its hearty concurrence by a liberal subscription to aid in supplying all settlers with those commodities."

While Beecher may have mentioned a Sharpe Rifle from the pulpit, it is doubtful if that is the make of rifle that he sent in quantity to the settlers, as there are to be found

in the basement of Plymouth Church today, many cases of very rusty Mauser Rifles of that period.

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During the succeeding years, Plymouth Church was one of the few temples of free thought, opinion or speech. So bitter was the hatred for Abolitionists that at one time it was impossible to find a hall in Brooklyn or in New York wherein Wendell Phillips might speak. Beecher, becoming cognizant of the fact, immediately visited the trustees of the Church in person and obtained permission for Mr. Phillips to speak there. (see Thompson's History of Plymouth Church)

Just prior to the Civil War, in January, 1860, The Rev. Bishop Faulkner invoked Beecher's aid in raising the sum of \$900 for the purchase of a little mulatto girl, about ten years of age. Faulkner had brought her from Washington, D.C. with him, and he had obtained the consent of the owner of the slave to make the sale. Knox, in the Life and Work of Henry Ward Beecher, page 158, relates -- "On Sunday February 5th, 1860 she accompanied Mr. Beecher to the church and was placed by his side in the pulpit. Mr. Beecher presented her to the congregation, stated the facts of the case, and asked for a contribution sufficient to effect her purchase.

Among the audience was a lady named Rose Terry who, when the contribution box was passed to her drew a ring from her finger and dropped it in.....The amount contributed that morning, together with a collection taken up in Sunday School was \$1000."

A short time later, another slave girl, about twenty years old, was brought into Plymouth Church dressed in white, and after an impassioned plea by Beecher the congregation

contributed in jewelry and cash more than \$2000 with which to effect her release.

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During this time, many notables attended the services in Plymouth Church, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, Thackery, and Louis Kossuth being among them.

Beecher remained as pastor of the Church for forty years, from 1847 until 1887, the year of his death.

Architectural Description

Plymouth Church is noted for its simplicity of plan, and its straightforeward architecture in the later Colonial style just before the Victorian Era. The church proper is a building about 114 feet by 60 feet, and about 60 feet high. Its front and rear hallways, extending across the entire width give easy access to the auditorium and also to the four sets of stairs to the balcony. Additional stairs in the southwest and southeast corners gave the colored people entrance to the top gallery. The arrangement of the pews gives full view of the pulpit and the choir.

The accoustics of the church are exceptionally good, as even a whispered word can be heard in any part of the auditorium, balcony, or gallery.

The auditorium pews are arranged on a slightly sloping floor in a circular manner near the pulpit, and gradually straightening out as they approach the entrance of the building. The balcony pews follow a rectangular plan, and are rounded at the corners of the rectangle. These pews are built on steps, so as to give full view at all times of the pulpit.

The organ over the pulpit is of polished walnut, and of a massive design, and is crowned with gilded pipes and trumpets. Its dark color, and the mahogany top-rails of the pews, are in marked contrast to the light buff walls and cream-colored woodwork.

Certain improvements have been made in the building. Electric lights have been installed; the rear stairs have been replaced with stairs of fireproof material; and metal doors have replaced all of the old wood doors to the auditorium. Stained-glass memorial windows depicting subjects of interest in church history were added in 1907 by the Rev. N. D. Hilles.

A memorial gallery, or arcade, connecting the church with the Institute was donated by John Arbuckle, and erected in 1903. The older church buildings, in which Sunday School classes and lectures were held during Beecher's pastorate, burned down in 1925, and have not been restored, although the boiler room under these buildings is still used to heat the main church. (From field notes of C. Aubrey Jackson, architect of present survey)

Written May 10, 1934, by

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